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ABSTRACT

In 2000, Stately grants, earmarked to cover 50% of operational costs and purchases of mobile libraries in Norway, were proposed to be canceled. An intense lobby resulted in a transfer of operational costs to block grants. Grants toward the purchase of mobile libraries in Norway no longer exist. This paper discusses whether it is possible during economically hard times to maintain and even expand mobile library services. It addresses whether mobile libraries are a well-intentioned phenomenon that should be the first to go in difficult times, or whether this kind of service is so valuable that it will survive even fundamental changes within the financial and political framework. The paper looks into the history of Scandinavian mobile libraries to see what impact library legislation and financing has had on the development and decline of mobile library services. (Contains 10 references and 2 figures.) (Author/MES)

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## Mobile Libraries in the Scandinavian Countries: Development in View of Legislation and Financial Support

**Ruth Ørnholt**
Hordaland County Library
Bergen, Norway

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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***Abstract:***

*A year ago Stately grants, earmarked to cover 50% of operational costs and purchases of mobile libraries in Norway, was proposed to be canceled. An intense lobby resulted in a transfer of operational costs to block grants. Grants towards the purchase of mobile libraries in Norway, no longer exists. The paper discusses if it is possible during economically hard times to maintain and even expand the mobile library services. Are mobile libraries a good- intentional phenomenon, that should be the first to go when the rain sets in? Or is this kind of service so valuable - on its own terms - that its will survive even fundamental changes within the financial and political framework? By looking into the history of Scandinavian mobile libraries to see what impact library legislation and financing has had on the development (and decline) of the mobile library services it is possible to find some answers.*

A year ago people working within the field of mobile libraries in Norway received a shock. Stately grants, earmarked to cover 50% of operational costs and purchases, was proposed to be canceled. An intense lobby resulted in a transfer of operational costs to block grants, money that local authorities may choose to spend any way they want. Grants towards the purchase of mobile libraries in Norway, no longer exists.

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**Introduction**

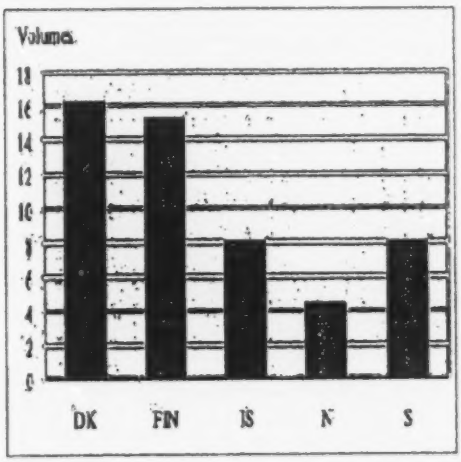
As far as library facilities are concerned, Norway is the least developed of the Scandinavian countries. Norway has the lowest book-lending rate per capita; a great many library employees lack professional qualifications; library premises are often inadequate for its purpose. Not surprisingly, in view of this slightly bleak picture, mobile libraries are scarce in comparison with neighboring countries. Norway has the highest number of library units, many of them are small branch libraries, accessible only a few hours a week and with a poor media collection.

Norway's librarians cast envious glances towards their neighbors, who have achieved a lot within library development that Norwegians most certainly would like to emulate:

Structurally **Finland** and Norway have much in common. Both are big but scarcely populated countries, and both have experienced rapid economic growth within a very short time span. Thanks to Finnish governmental priorities, a string of spectacular public libraries - as a rule designed by supreme architects - have been built. A great many local authorities run a mobile library service.

By Scandinavian standard **Denmark** is a small, densely populated country. The Danish public library service, one of the best in Europe, is an example to Norwegians. **Sweden** is a closer match as far as national venture is concerned, even though the Swedes as well can boast higher book-lending figures than Norway.

Public library volumes lent per inhabitant. 1997




Libraries and volumes. 1997

| | Number of Libraries | Stock of volumes | Volumes lent |
|---|---|---|---|
| DK | 250 | 34454000 | 85880000 |
| FIN | 992 | 36831532 | 81010999 |
| IS | 173 | 2081672 | 2076768 |
| N | 1108 | 20508000 | 18810000 |
| S | 288 | 43659000 | 72345000 |

Fig. 1: Nordic countries in figures 1999

It may come as a surprise, considering Norway's booming oil economy - to a great extent controlled by the State government - that Norwegian local finances are rather strained. The very same State government leaves an increasing amount of tasks to be solved on a local level, while the financial means to do so regularly fail to materialize. It goes without saying that local politicians have a hard time sorting out their priorities. The library services are forced to take part in an ever tougher infighting over tax-payer's money, being constantly challenged by natural heavy-weights like School and Health.



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This State government of affairs is not new. The development of a public library system has always been vulnerable to the ups an downs of community's finances, and to its legislative restrictions. The public library concept is more easily acclaimed when economy is booming, than when it's on the slide. At the same time Norwegian public libraries are by no means exempt from modern demands of better equipment, increased accessibility, and a generally faster adjustment to a braver and newer world.

The questions we are faced with are these: During hard timed ... is it possible - yes, indeed right - to maintain and even expand the mobile library services? Shouldn't a pious librarian be thankful, if it were possible to maintain a well run main library and a few rudimentary branches? Are mobile libraries a good-intentional phenomenon, the type that should be the first to go when the rain sets in? Without heavy public subsidies - is a mobile library like a tortoise turned upside down ? Or is this kind of service so valuable - on its own terms - that its independence should be bolstered, enabling it to survive even fundamental changes within the financial and political framework? To answer these questions, I have looked into the history of Scandinavian mobile libraries to see what impact library legislation and financing has had on the development (and decline) of the mobile library services.

During my studies it has become apparent to me that a number of factors are playing a part. Therefore, my presentation will have to be rather simplified. Even then I'd try to draw some conclusions concerning the possibilities of maintaining mobile libraries, in a society where this service not only has to compete with the politicians's concern for schools and care for the elderly. Other contestants are the demands of up-to-date main libraries.

**Public administration**

**Norway**, **Sweden** and **Denmark** have three levels of public administration. The governments draw their power from democratically elected parliaments (Ting). The countries are divided into a number of counties, who in their turn are divided into local authorities. Both the counties and the local authorities are run by political institutions. **Finland** deviates from this system: On a regional level there is no elected instrument of power. Sweden is about to change their system.

In all four countries we find a system of regional/county libraries. The regional library system in Finland and some Swedish, stands on a different legal and economic footing than the others. But in all Scandinavia the regional or county libraries have their task in common: a supportive and consultative role versus local libraries. The existence of a regional/county library is legally certified. In most cases this function is entrusted to the public library in the regional capital or another big public library.

Local public libraries are financed from tax revenues. Public libraries are run by the local authorities, who also determine the extent of services provided. In Norway many mobile libraries are owned and run by the regional libraries. In Sweden, Denmark and Finland most busses are owned and run by local authorities.

In all the countries local authorities are autonomous political bodies. Especially in Norway and Finland keeping the rural districts populated is considered a national task. These parts receive governmental subsidies to maintain their infrastructure and services. Nowadays, this kind of treatment is accepted and expected by most people.

All countries have a library act (Denmark from 1920; Finland from 1928; Norway from1935; Sweden between 1905 and 1964 and then again from 1997) with the requirement of a compulsory public library service. Lending free of charge is generally established.

In the beginning of the 1990s all the Scandinavian countries went through an economic depression. The crisis had its greates impact in Finland. In spite of being one of the wealthiest countries in the world, with

a very high standard of living, Finland suffered from its trade agreements an generally close economic ties with the crumbling Soviets

**Development in view of legislation and financial support**

The chart below shows that the development of mobile libraries in Scandinavian countries, in spite of their both fundamental and superficial similarities, has taken quite different courses. The size of the countries seems to have no apparent relevance. Answers to the differences must rather be found in varying political attitudes and library legislation.

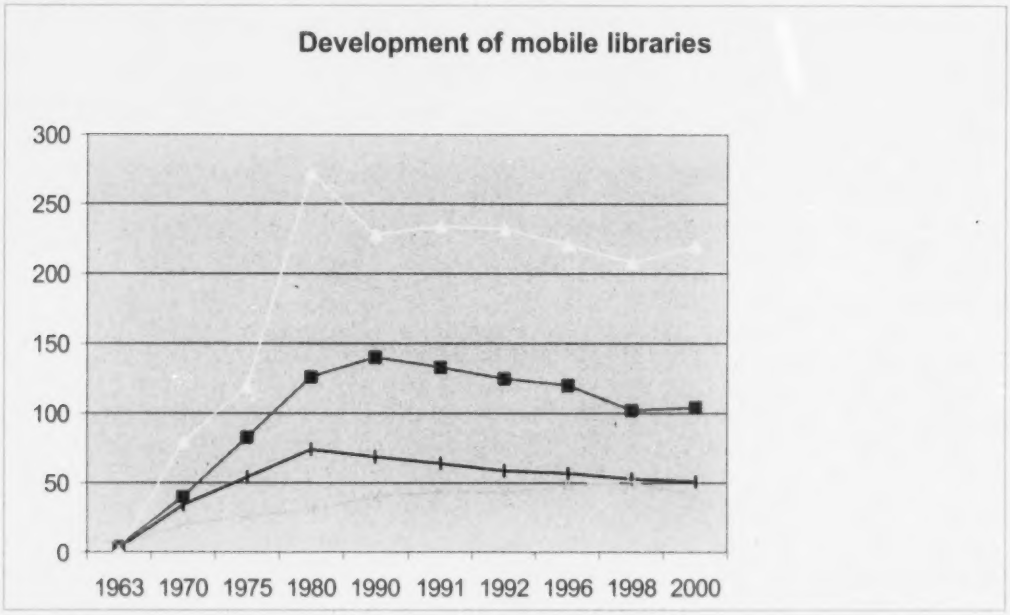


Fig.2

In **Finland** the library act of 1962 made it possible to purchase and operate mobile libraries with substantial governmental aid. In 1972 Finland had 120 busses, and the amount rose to 272 in 1980. Later is has decreased, but still mobile libraries are an essential part of the public library system in Finland. The mobile libraries in Finland are owned by the local authorities. Primarily they serve rural areas.

Since 1979 Finnish local libraries have had their operational costs financed by the State government, on the same basis as the educational system. Up until 1992 the financing was earmarked. Between 1979 to 1992 governmental grants covered 51% to 86% of public libraries' operational costs , the highest rate relating to poor and sparsely populated local authorities. This centrally instigated enterprise made it possible to develop a library system of the highest quality, covering even de sparsely populated parts of the country with a web of libraries. Between 1979 and 1992, the State government covered between 5% and 92% of construction costs.

In the 1990s, Finnish local authorities were given extensive autonomy. No longer libraries were going to receive State government subsidies directly, according to predetermined percentages, like they had been used to for decades. Today, libraries are covered by a statutory financial program, along with others of the State government's educational and cultural obligations. Bur as libraries no longer receive direct State

government grants according to predetermined percentages based on the financial capacity of the locality, it is difficult to calculate the sums allocated to the library system. It is left to local authorities independently to assess their financial share of libraries' operational costs. (?)

The construction and establishment of a new library is governmentally subsidized by 25% to 50% of the costs. By application, a mobile library may be established on the same terms, together with other libraries that are subsidized for a special purpose(provincial libraries, central library, multicultural library, the Saami library, co-Nordic bookmobiles).

As the first of the Nordic countries, **Denmark** had its first mobile library running in 1926. However, an up-to-date service, lending books directly to the users, was not introduced until the end of the sixties. In 1970 a reform of the Danish local administrations, merging a great number of local authorities, created an increased demand for mobile libraries: These new and larger local authorities chose to establish mobile services, in order to speed up the introduction of an adequate library service in rural areas. With the help of the free reserve kept by the Danish library authorities, it was established a rental agreement with the library support center (Bibliotekcentralen). This resulted in no less than an avalanche of mobile libraries, most of them with a capacity of 3000 - 3500 volumes. Now, the buses are mostly financed by the local authorities.

The Danish public library act of 1964 established a State governmentally grant of 45% of the libraries total operating costs up to a certain level and 30% after this. The most important subsequent revisions of the act took place in 1985 when the public libraries' ear-marked government grants were changed into block grants, turning the public libraries into purely local institutions, and later in 1993 when the State government was given full financial responsibility for county libraries. These 14 county libraries also functions as local public libraries.

In later years, even Denmark has experienced a reduction of mobile libraries. From 1988 to 1999 259 library branches and 16 mobile libraries were closed down. The reasons are various: a decline in the number of customers; the necessity to strengthen the main library; local saving programs. Today there are 51 mobile libraries in Denmark, a decrease of three from last year.

In spite of these set-backs, the mobile library still has a strong position in the country. There has been a will to modernize the concept, both as far as content and equipment is concerned. Older units are constantly replaced. In their budget negotiations, Danish local politicians give a priority to expenditure on mobile libraries that is quite foreign to their colleagues in Norway and Sweden.

In **Sweden** the first mobile library was established1948, based on British and American patterns. The first regional mobile library was financed through a collection, organized by local authorities within the county in question. Other counties hired busses instead of buying them.. Gothenburg, the second largest city in Sweden, had 4 busses in 1962. Since 1984, no goevernmental grant has been allocated to mobile libraries in Sweden.

Sweden was without library legislation between 1965 and 1997. Traditionally, central influence on the library situation has never been very strong, so the standard of Swedish libraries has varied. Also, Sweden has tried running public libraries on a commercial basis. There are now 104 bookmobiles in Sweden. For the most part they operate within one locality. However, nineteen local authorities are sharing busses.

Both Denmark and Sweden reached a peak in 1989, with respectively 69 and 140 bookmobiles.

In Scandinavia, like the United State governments, the first buses were launched by private initiative. A Norwegian part time librarian, who also happened to be a baker, took the saying "Man does not live on

bread alone" quite literally. He filled his bakery van with books from the local library, and then hit the road in order to feed people's hunger for literature. This was in 1938. In 1939 two bus services, operating on a regional basis, were established. A library boat, "The Epos", was launched in 1958. In spite of promising early starts, thanks to crusaders for the course of public library, Norway experienced no really significant development until the Library Act of 1971.

The Act paved the way for governmental financing of local and county mobile libraries (buses and boats). These subsidies stipulated that a certain amount of money, for the same purposes, was granted from local and county authorities. Thus the governmental grants were an "approximate appropriation". This meant a great deal for the development of a mobile library service in the 1970s and1980s. These grants rose from NOK 184 000 in 1971 to a total of 7.5 million in 1985.

When governmental grants earmarked for operating mobile libraries were withdrawn in 1986, this service rapidly experienced stagnation. The new regulations provided some means for the purchase of vans/buses, but operational subsidies were only granted to local authorities on a three-year period trial basis. This system was implemented in 1986, and lasted until 1993. It had no enterprising effect. On the contrary: Planned projects were shelved. In 1993 policy was changes once again: Operational costs should be covered only for local authorities in sparsely populated areas, as part of a regional development program. However, all counties and local authorities would receive a 50% support in the event of bus purchases. This led to some new activity.

In 2001 a new change has taken place. he State government withdraws even further from its previous engagement. As already mentioned: From this year on subsidies of operational costs will be transferred to block grants, leaving mobile libraries at the mercy of regional and local priorities. There will be no support for the purchase of new buses.

**Trends:**

I personally believe that, if we keep Norway out of it, by now the number of mobile libraries in the Scandinavian countries are fixed - more or less. To maintain today's level, it will not be enough to replace old buses with new one and otherwise keep on as always. The quality of the bus services must change according to changes in society at large. Mobile libraries must be a part of a value adding public library system, and therefore join the new trends of development.

The trend today is twofold: either smaller units designed to serve special target groups: or big, fully equipped units with an enlarged staff, designed to replace ailing branches with limited opening hours. If the alternative is closing down the service, old units are frequently renovated. To avoid the same, two or more local authorities often join their forces, sharing a mobile library between them.

In Scandinavia there is a tendency towards a narrowing focus within this field. From being movable library branches, the buses now offer specialized services to special target groups.
Significantly, installation of computer facilities has made customers feel that mobile services are in no way inferior to a stationary library. Some units profile themselves as "Internet Buses", offering computer training and free access to the Web. In the future, it is not only access to but particularly the quality of knowledge that will be important. The library, as a quality institution, is expected to provide the answer to this. This is also a challenge to mobile libraries.

One particular locality in Denmark allows the bus to have exceptionally long afternoon stops at places that cover immigrant communities: In this way, foreign speaking children may have a helping hand with their homework. Another locality specifically uses the bus in a project of language stimulation for children in

transition from kindergarten to school. In addition, experiments have been made using the mobile libraries as a vehicle - so to speak -in the education of adults. One Danish bus is specially equipped to serve children under the age of six. In many Norwegian local authorities, with a number of schools that are too small to develop their own library, the buses represent the only library service offered to the pupils.

In Sweden many of the buses specialize in cultural activities. In Norway one bus is used bringing cultural presentations to children all over the region, a joint venture involving both schools and public libraries. These tours involve a wide range of cultural expressions, inspiring pupils and teachers alike to venture into foreign territory: at one time a belly dancer, at other times a sculptor, a drummer or an African storyteller.

In scarcely populated parts of Scandinavia mobile libraries are even used to distribute public services other than the original purpose. Examples exist of buses functioning as banks, in addition to libraries, and also - since trading wine and spirits is controlled by the government in Norway, Sweden and Finland - as distributor of alcohol.

As in most fields within the library system, Denmark represents the Scandinavian avant guard as far as new trends in mobile libraries are concerned. Norway, a much more conservative nation , mostly follows the beaten track - although one or two signs of innovation do exist.

**Conclusion**

During the last thirty years, financing of Scandinavian public libraries has seen great changes. The main reason is the introduction of a system of block grants from central government to county and local authorities. Another factor is a general worsening of the economic situation within public service.

Differences between Norway on one hand, Denmark and Finland on the other, existed before the new grant system was introduced, in regard to both library use and appropriations. The former Norwegian library director Else Granheim explains this as follows: If Norwegian State government grants, as in Denmark and Finland, had been provided on the basis of total operational expenditure instead of being based on a sum per inhabitant for materials and labor expenses, the situation would have been quite different. In Finland prospective grants for the acquisition of mobile libraries have been included in the budget. This practise still is customary, and the results are clearly visible in the statistical overview. From time to time, grants of this type have also been provided in Norway - not on such favorable terms, however, and no garantee of a continuation has been included in the legislation. The grant scheme tried out in Norway between 1993 and 2000 did little to increase any significant local interest in the mobile library service.

It is safe to say that the general attitude of Norwegian local politicians, regarding mobile libraries, has not been a positive one. Ailing local finances have led to a greater degree of centralization – schools have been merged and post offices closed. In many places this development leaves the library as a last stand in a fight to preserve a communal culture. To keep the library open as a meeting-place, even if it fails to meet requirements in respect of bookstocs, information services, opening hours etc., is vital to the social well-being of many small communities. In such a situation it is difficult to make local politicians invest in mobile libraries, even though they will provide a much better service, with more modern facilities than stationary libraries. As mobile services were not firmly established during the good times, it's hard to make room for them in this lean day and age for Norwegian local authorities - even more so since the State government has discontinued its earmarked grants to libraries.

During the last few years, a number of branch libraries have been closed. Even then, the Norwegian library system includes an amount of exceptionally small and vulnerable unites - too impotent to defend their existence in the long run.

I believe stagnation of real growth within the mobile library field - since the mid eighties, in fact - has two reasons. First: The notion that a good bookmobile is far better - and cheaper - than one or more bad branch libraries, has not taken hold of politicians on the local level. It is a problem that most bookmobiles in Norway are owned by county libraries - not by local authorities, who fail to develop a feeling that the mobile library is their concern, a responsibility from which they can benefit. These buses cover vast areas. Their visits are too rare to make an impact on local communities.

Second: To no great extent has mobile library services in Norway been developed beyond the concept of a slightly old-fashioned branch library on wheels. The absence of a contemporary raison d'etre is a soft spot indeed. The bookmobile has been wide open to brutal extinction, in favor of pooling resources to bolster an up-to-date main library.

By contrast, the Danes have been able to put up a fight to protect their mobile libraries. Politicians have identified themselves with the cause, the buses being their own babies. And an innovative capacity to redefine the mobile library's functions in changing times, indicates that bookmobiles will have a future on the road in Denmark. In Finland mobile facilities are an established part of every local library system.

In Norway neither the development of mobile libraries nor regular library premises have a strategic basis within national planning. Sadly, political signals point in the wrong direction - notably the dismal practice of letting library subsidies be included in government's block grants to localities, leading the way to valuable library services being beheaded in favor of schools, hospitals and equally noble causes. Local mobile libraries, a relative novelty without the protection of political knights in shining armor, is an easy target when budgets lose their balance. On county level bookmobiles stand a better chance to survive. The problem is that county organization of the service, too far away from the customer, blocks bookmobiles' potential to be an inherent and valuable part of local communities.

As far as Norway is concerned, chances are - I'm sorry to say - that the bus has literally left the bus stop, with us Norwegians left behind because we didn't mark the time. Only if a national library policy eloquently speaks in favor of the mobile library as a field of enterprise, supporting it with earmarked financial investments, will the mobile library stand a chance in future Norway. Alternatively local authorities must receive enough founding to be able to establish mobile libraries wherever there is a demand for it.

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